Panther Supporters

Many Black Americans Voice Strong Backing For Defiant Militants

Police Harassment Charged, Though Officials Deny It; Breakfast Program Cited

But Some Deplore Violence

A WALL STREET JOURNAL *News Roundup*

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover describes the Black Panther Party as a dangerous "hate-type" organization, but Evord Conner disagrees.

"I dig the Black Panthers. I think a lot of them," says Mr. Conner, who is the head of an antipoverty center in Yonkers, N.Y., and who is black himself. "They appeal to young kids and create a lot of black awareness. They're not just advocating militancy; they're talking about economic and political power. Right now, they're backing up what they preach, and that's why the man is coming down on them."

Mr. Conner's view may be surprising to those whites who regard the Panthers as a radical splinter group without wide support among black Americans. But his views may be more widely shared among blacks than many whites suppose.

This article was reported by David Dupree in San Francisco, Ed Henry in New York, Jim Hyatt in Cleveland and Jonathan R. Laing in Chicago.

In fact, a Wall Street Journal sampling of opinion among black citizens in four metropolitan areas across the nation indicates a clear majority of blacks strongly support both the goals and the methods of the Black Panthers. An even larger percentage believes, moreover, that police officials are determined to crush the party by arresting or killing its key officials.

Conflicts between the Panthers and police have received wide publicity recently with the fatal shootings of two Panthers and the wounding of four others in a police raid at Chicago on Dec. 4 and the wounding of three Los Angeles Panthers and three policemen in a raid there Dec. 8. These incidents, plus the claim by the Panthers that a score or more other members of the party have been killed by police in the past two years, have prompted a number of prominent Americans to call for an investigation of whether the Panthers are the victims of a nationwide campaign of police harassment.

Police officials in several big U.S. cities, for their part, deny any such conspiracy, and they contend that the Panther casualty claims are inflated. They say, moreover, that such confrontations as have occurred were provoked by the Panthers' arming themselves and plotting against authorities.

One effect of the uproar has been to create an awareness of the Panthers among many blacks who previously had taken little notice of them. "Everybody in the black community is talking about the Panthers now—even people who never paid attention to them before," says William Davis, 31, a door-to-door television salesman in Chicago.

Raids Arouse Sympathy

Moreover, the police raids appear to have aroused wide sympathy for the Panthers among blacks who, while they may not agree with Panther tactics, resent what they see as a deliberate police effort to wipe out the Panthers.

The Wall Street Journal's testing of black sentiment, admittedly an unscientifc one, was conducted in interviews with 100 persons in the New York, Cleveland, Chicago and San Francisco areas. Some 60% expressed full support for both the philosophy and tactics of the Panthers, including the Panthers' asserted willingness to resort to violence. A dozen others said they admired the goals of the party while disagreeing with some of its methods—specifically, in most cases, the emphasis on violence. Only 26 said they flatly opposed the Panthers.

Much of the support for the party comes from younger people apparently attracted to the Panthers by their panache—their distinctive uniforms of black berets and black leather jackets, their ostentatious display of guns, their avowed determination to overturn the American "system," their refusal to back-down under intense police pressure.

The Narcotics Issue

But a sizable number of blacks support the Panthers because they admire other, less-publicized activities of the party such as its free-breakfast program for ghetto youngsters, its free medical care program and its war on narcotics use among black youth.

"The news media never say how strong the Panthers are against narcotics," says Mr. Conner of the Yonkers antipoverty center. "You take kids in Harlem, they sort of envy hustlers —guys who take numbers, push dope. But the Panthers are telling kids from grade school level, don't mess with dope. It works."

In California, a black professional athlete who earns more than $100,000 a year says attitudes toward the Panthers have changed dramatically in the past couple of years. Older blacks formerly looked upon the Panthers as "a lazy bunch of field niggers who would rather go out and shoot people up instead of work," he says. But now "the people of my generation realize that the Panthers are accomplishing more with things like their breakfast program than they are with guns."

Many over-30 blacks also express admiration for the tough-mindedness of the Panthers. Charles G. Hurst, president of Malcolm X Junior College, part of the Chicago junior college system, says he respects the Panthers because "they have made none of the compromises my generation made." He says the Panthers won't settle for having a few blacks succeed in a white-oriented society but demand genuine equality of economic opportunity and justice for black people. "While their methods of advancing the black cause aren't mine, I've never doubted the depth of their social concern and love of the people," he says.

A number of blacks say they have become disillusioned with what they consider the slow pace of civil rights progress under such organizations as the National Association for the Ad-

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vancement of Colored People. A 35-year-old Federal civil servant in San Francisco contends, for instance, that the NAACP is a group of "Uncle Toms" led by whites. "The Panthers are obviously effective or everybody wouldn't be so afraid of them," reasons a wealthy San Francisco businessman. . . . "They are starting to represent more and more of the majority of black people."

On the other hand, a number of blacks disclaim both the goals and the tactics of the Panthers. "It's a pretty militant group," says Leroi Jones, 37, who works in the stock department of a Cleveland jewelry store (and who is not to be confused with the playwright of the same name). "I don't go along with the way they are trying to accomplish their supposed goal. The few I've talked to think America owes black people something. But their methods are too violent and too way out."

Making Violence Inevitable?

In Chicago, the Rev. J. H. Jackson, president of the National Baptist Convention and pastor of the Olivet Baptist Church, the largest black church in Chicago, decries the revolutionary goals of the Black Panther Party. "I'm for no group that doesn't observe the Constitution and work for change through the courts," he says. "I feel that black leaders made an unfortunate turn when they began to espouse civil disobedience, because this makes violence inevitable."

"We could do without the Panthers," says Charles Benifeld, 37, a buyer for the Cleveland school board. "I just don't believe in their methods. If they want to flout the law, they should be treated like any other lawbreaker. If they don't agree with the law, they can go through proper channels to change it."

It's apparent that many black citizens lack confidence in the police—a fact that no doubt bears strongly on their willingness to believe that the Panthers are the victims of a nationwide police conspiracy. (FBI Director Hoover contends in the FBI's 1969 annual report that policemen are the victims. He says at least seven were killed in the past six months and more than 120 others were injured fighting black militants. Specifically citing the Black Panthers, he says, "Many attacks on police by black extremists are unprovoked and nothing more than planned ambushes.")

"I believe that when a cop goes to the Panthers' headquarters, he goes with one thing in mind—to annihilate them," says Reynold Major, a 33-year-old state narcotics rehabilitation officer in New York City. "Therefore, the Panthers can't afford to trust cops."

"Why Not the Leg?"

"A lot of police just don't like colored people, period," says J. Johnson, a 49-year-old Cleveland construction worker. "And any time they kill a colored guy they don't worry about it. They know they can get justifiable homicide. Why are black men never shot in the leg? It's always in the head, to kill a guy."

A number of black men and women say their feelings about policemen have been affected by bitter personal experience with the law. Many contend they have been unjustly harassed or have witnessed harassment of other blacks by police.

"When I see a white policeman, I'm genuinely worried, because I'm never sure how he will react," says Mr. Hurst, the junior college president in Chicago. "They can dispense summary justice in black areas and later be exonerated on the grounds of justifiable homicide."

A few blacks say such feelings have led them to buy guns—thereby following the advice of Black Panther leaders who say blacks should arm themselves. "Everybody should have a gun in his home," says Mr. Johnson, the Cleveland construction worker. Otherwise, he says, a burglar can come in and take everything—"and some bad policemen just break your door down. You need a gun to protect your family."

Generally, though, blacks say they shun firearms, despite a widespread belief among them that white people are arming themselves. "I think fear has prompted many white people to buy guns, and when they say that black people are arming themselves, they are only reflecting their own insecurities," says Cecil Phillips of New York, a 62-year-old former hospital clerk.